

# House reviews opening of Parliament



## What do the Sydney Olympics and the current Federal Parliament have in common?

Both were opened by Australia's Governor-General, Sir William Deane. Both opening ceremonies drew on traditions many centuries old.

For Sydney, it was the rituals of ancient Greece that formed the backdrop for the lighting of the Olympic cauldron. For the Federal Parliament in Canberra, it was rituals drawn from English history that formed the basis for its most recent opening in 1998.

To constitute early English Parliaments, the King summoned together the leading men of the clergy and the nobility so that taxes could be gathered and advice offered on how those taxes should be spent. Reflecting this tradition, Australia's Governor-General summons the Parliament together after each Federal election by issuing a proclamation. The reading of the proclamation is the first ceremonial act of a new Parliament's opening day.

## *We want a unique ceremony for a distinctively Australian Parliament.*

One of the main features of opening day is a series of processions between the House of Representatives and Senate Chambers and to the Members' Hall. Members of the House walk over to the Senate to hear the Deputy to the Governor-General announce the opening of Parliament. They then walk back to the House to elect a Speaker. They go to the Members' Hall to present the Speaker to the Governor-General and back to the House. Later they return to the Senate to hear a speech by the Governor-General.

This ceremony has remained virtually unchanged since the opening of the first Federal Parliament in 1901. The House of Representatives Procedure Committee thinks it is time to review the opening ceremony to see if it still meet the needs of the Parliament and the nation in the 21st century.

When it last looked at this matter, the House Procedure Committee concluded that some parts of the opening were confusing for participants and observers alike. In reviewing its earlier findings and considering new proposals, the Procedure Committee will need to balance the requirements of the Australian Constitution, the preservation of an appropriate level of ceremony and tradition, and the need for Parliament to engage with the community it exists to serve.

"The House Procedure Committee wants to know whether we can find a ceremony which successfully reflects both our Westminster heritage and modern Australian values and culture," said Gary Nairn, Committee Chair and Member for Eden-Monaro (NSW). "We want a unique ceremony for a distinctively Australian Parliament."

The House Procedure Committee is known as one of the forces for change in the Federal Parliament. Through its inquiries the Procedure Committee proposes improvements to, and innovations in, parliamentary practice and procedure. Its last three inquiries have delivered significant proposals on community involvement in the operation of the House and its committees, the electronic transaction of parliamentary business and enhancing the Main Committee (the second Chamber of the House). Many of its recommendations in these areas have already been adopted.

"The ceremonies of the first sitting of the Parliament after an election are an important reminder of our responsibility, as Members of Parliament, to represent all Australians and do our best for the future of the country," said Mr Nairn. "That's why we want to make the opening as meaningful as possible. We would welcome any proposals to make the opening day of our Parliament more relevant for Members and for all Australians."

For more information about the opening of Parliament, see **Factsheet No. 9 – A new Parliament**, available at [www.aph.gov.au/house/info/factsht](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/factsht) or from the House of Representatives Chamber Research Office on (02) 6277 4685.

**For more information on how you can have your say on the opening of Parliament**, call: (02) 6277 4685, email: [procedure.committee.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:procedure.committee.reps@aph.gov.au) or visit the Committee's web site: [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc)